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The Shoals

photos by Brian Oar



{ EXPLORE }

ROBERT TRENT JONES TRAIL • ALABAMA

Glorious Grind

story by Eric N. Hart

The Robert Trent Jones Trail is accessible, affordable and doable in one big, beautiful trip

We would be the first. According to Bill Lang, marketing director for Alabama's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, no journalist had ever played each of its 11 mini-destinations in one trip.

That's because it's no small feat.

Full circle, the Trail is 1,078 miles by car (presumably the same by horse), with each stop in or near Alabama's largest metropolitan areas, offering 18 to 54 holes of golf, 468 holes altogether. And my son and I played at least one course on every segment of the Trail, under perfect summer skies with high temperatures of 81 to 98 degrees.

That's 252 holes. In 10 days.

{ EXPLORE }

ROBERT TRENT JONES TRAIL

THE SHOALS (Florence & Muscle Shoals)

Play Fighting Joe and The Schoolmaster (36 holes)

Stay Marriott Shoals Hotel & Spa

Eat Swamper's Bar & Grill **Other Cool Stuff to See** Wilson Dam

Fighting Joe (pictured) was the first course on the Trail to break 8,000 yards and did so by a full sand-wedge. Links style and water-lapped, with the magnetic substance in play on 13 holes, it is a visual stunner and stern test of ballflight management. **The Schoolmaster** only has water in play on five holes, but is a much steeper, tighter, tree-lined opponent. **The Marriott Shoals Hotel** rests on the banks of the Tennessee River, adjacent the magnificent **Wilson Dam** — perfect for a starry night stroll. The Marriott features Alabama's only revolving diner and the tastiest local dining fare at **Swamper's**, next to the incredible waterfall pool — try the loaded Swamper's Burger, with fried green tomato.

HAMPTON COVE (Huntsville)

Play River, Highlands and Short (54 holes)

Eat Blue Plate Café

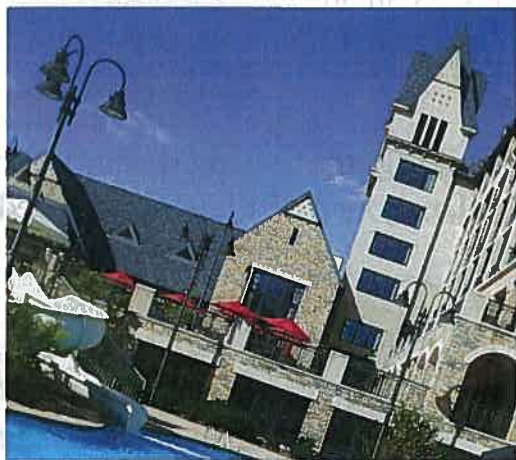
The **River** distinguishes itself as the only Trail course without a bunker. Mostly flat, and natural, with water in play on 16 holes, it would be the ideal course for Bubba Watson's hovercraft cart. The **Highlands** course is a more scenic rollercoaster ride, with far more variety and a beautiful mule barn between holes 4 and 5. No. 9, a 526-yard uphill, feels more like 1,526 yards. The **Short** course has water in play on 11 more holes. If you weren't aquaphobic before, play the Short and River and you will be. Post golf, pick your Southern Fried passion at the **Blue Plate Café**.

ROSS BRIDGE (Birmingham)

Play Ross Bridge (18 holes)

Stay Renaissance Ross Bridge Resort & Spa

Eat The Clubhouse Restaurant **Other Cool Stuff** Follow the Bagpiper around the Ross Bridge grounds each evening at sunset



Another Top 3 Trail lodging option boasting an incredible patio and pool, the Four-Diamond "Top 500 in the World" **Renaissance Ross Bridge** chateau-tel (Hotel Castle) is as impressive indoors as it is from the parking lot, and next door is arguably the most visually stunning course on the Trail (and third longest in world). With anywhere from 10-12 picturesque "signature" holes, it also features a transfixing waterfall that cascades down the steep hillside, dropping more than 80 feet in elevation to the lake, splitting the greens

of holes 9 and 18. The grilled buffalo wings at **The Clubhouse Restaurant** are great, but the Cowpoke Burger with Coca-Cola BBQ sauce and onion rings is even better. Don't miss the late-night live music in the lobby at **JT's Lounge**. And a special shoutout to Course Ranger **Charlie Snell**, one of the best conversationalists on the Trail.

Of course, it took a guy from way up north, not far from my home in Minnesota, to bring this Trail to life. Dr. David Bronner wanted to move somewhere people could comfortably play golf year-round, and Bear Bryant's old Alabama stomping grounds fit the bill. But apparently one course wasn't enough for Dr. Bronner.

He wanted to go *big*.

What began as a plan for 324 holes at seven sites became reality (and has since increased by 50 percent), and Bronner's vision for the Trail became the primary subsidy for Retirement Systems of Alabama. It's unique, and it might be the single greatest golf venture in American history, especially considering it bears Mr. Jones' name. Interestingly, Jones was the only architect who responded to Dr. Bronner's initial pitch.

Great call both ways.

Other than Lakewood Golf Club in Point Clear, each course was conceived and built as a permanent cornerstone of the Trail. It's no marketing gimmick, no "title only" association, and definitely no "flash in the pan" success story. In its 20-plus years of existence, SunBelt Golf and its 1,000-plus employees have kept the Trail running strong before, during and after some of this nation's hardest economic times. It's a fair argument as to who has benefitted more, the retired community of Alabama or the thousands of golfers who annually can, and do, play at least 363 1/2 days a year on its two-dozen plus courses.

Enhancing the "destination" value of the Trail is its close association with Marriott, which has eight outstanding hotels, collectively known as the Resort Collection, serving as ideal hubs at seven of the 11 Trail stops. Three recently made *Travel + Leisure's* "Top 500 Hotels in the World" list, and several were our home away from home for nine nights, loaded with the amenities any business or casual traveler (single, couple, family or golf group) would have on their check lists, including spas, fitness centers, scenic tropical-themed pools, fast elevators and flavorful restaurants with dynamic evening entertainment options. The award-winning "Stay" selections greatly complement the "Play"

Ross Bridge, Hampton Cove
& Oxmoor Valley

photos by Michael Clemmer



{ EXPLORE }

ROBERT TRENT JONES TRAIL

OXMOOR VALLEY (Birmingham)

Play Valley, Ridge and Short (54 holes)
Stay Renaissance Ross Bridge Resort & Spa
Eat Saw's BBQ

Just two short miles from the Renaissance, these three routings at **Oxmoor Valley** are tighter and tougher golf challenges than most on the Trail. The first course to open on the Trail (in 1992), the **Valley** is a maze of narrow, tree-lined fairways with some great tee shots and scattered hazardous ponds. The **Ridge** course makes phenomenal use of the trenches left behind by U.S. Steel's former mining operations. The beautiful 5-par No. 3 hole leads you sharply down from the tee over a river and up to a raised green surrounded by shale mounds and walls. The **Short** course is a mini merged version of the other two, pleasantly playing downhill on most holes. A tasty local dining option, try **Saw's** signature white BBQ sauce ... on pretty much anything.

SILVER LAKES (Anniston/Gadsden)

Play Mindbreaker, Heartbreaker, Backbreaker and Short (4 nines, 36 holes)
Eat Top O' The River ("Catfish Exceptionale") **Other Cool Stuff** Talladega Superspeedway

Northeast Alabama was hit hard by an EF-4 Tornado in April of 2011. **Silver Lakes**, adjacent Talladega National Forest and the Appalachian foothills, lost 40,000 trees and two-dozen golf holes, but Trail officials refused to shut it down or write it off. Resurrected. It is better than it ever was, some believe. I consider their greens (and service) to be the best on the Trail. The **Short** course is a collection of Signatures, by far the best short set on the Trail. Well-deserved praise goes out to all involved in restoring this beautiful facility.

GRAND NATIONAL (Auburn/Opelika)

Play Links, Lakes and Short (54 holes)
Stay Marriott Grand National
Eat Byron's BBQ for pulled pork; Mike & Eds for cornbread
Other Cool Stuff Cheaha State Park, Alabama's highest point

Trail CEO John Cannon says **Grand National** has "everything you could ever want in one golf site." RTJ lauded it as "the single greatest site for a golf complex ever." Big words. Even bigger delivery. Both championship courses list among the Top 50 national golf values by multiple publications. Thirty-two of the 54 holes touch 600-acre **Lake Saugahatchee**, and several more wave at it. The **Lakes'** natural Island No. 15 is one of the five most unforgettable tee shots on the Trail. The **Links** is loaded with beauties, especially holes 2-4 and the powerhouse lakeside closer No. 18. And the **Short** course is, without question, the "Best 18-hole Short Course on the Trail." (And No. 6 was the site of my first-ever hole-in-one.)

HIGHLAND OAKS (Dothan)

Play Marshwood, Magnolia, Highlands and Short (36 holes)
Eat The Blue Plate **Other Cool Stuff** Adventureland Theme Park

The "Peanut Capital of the World" (in southeast Alabama) hosts the secluded, country club-like **Highland Oaks**, a rewarding detour from major state highways but a top draw for neighboring panhandle Floridians. **Marshwood**, as titled, plays around many a marsh, with stunning significant carry tee shots. **Magnolia** is heavily peppered with the namesake variety of trees. **Highlands** is easily the most popular, and scenic, with three daunting lakeside tee shots. And the **Short** course is extremely family-friendly. Excellent service abounds. Having loved our initiation at the **Blue Plate Café** in Huntsville we hit the Blue Plate here, only to find they were amazingly unrelated, though equally great.

opportunities of the Trail, most of them just a quick complimentary shuttle ride from their respective golf facilities.

Just about every golf publication has profiled the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, lauded its magnitude and applauded the originality. And it markets itself with what I like to think of as a *Lee Greenwood mentality* ... "from the lakes of Minnesota to the hills of Tennessee." (There are six promotional billboards within 50 miles of my house). And in many ways, the Trail appeals more to the average everyday golfer than any top-ranked course or destination can, largely because its cost-to-value is relatively unmatched and the wealth of golf options dwarfs those in often more well-known coastal regions. Alabama can compete head-to-head for golf business and attention with the Carolinas, Florida, Arizona and California, but that's not their true competition — the Trail's evangelists praise and appreciate those other destinations as much as any traveler, but they don't worry in the least about where the grass may be seasonally greener.

Not everyone can afford to play there, for one thing, while anyone can afford to play here. Not everyone is skilled enough to play some of those courses, but anyone can get it around on a Trail track if they choose the right tees.

Plus, most facilities offer instruction centers, full-scale practice ranges and plenty of professionals willing and able to help you with any facet of your game.

In short, you don't have to be good to love it here. On the other hand, you can equally be great and love it here — the Trail hosts multiple LPGA and Champions Tour events, even officially sponsoring an event at Capitol Hill for the first time next year. The heart of America's golf scene truly pounds strong year-round in the Yellowhammer State.

From the Gulf Shore coast near Mobile, to the Florida, Georgia and Mississippi state lines, it's seldom too hot or too cold, never hard to find outstanding golf, and the conditions ... well, lest you think (as I did) that surely some of these places have to be cow pastures, not one of them is. On the 15 courses we played, conditions were consistently impressive, with regularly rolled, smooth greens always running



Silver Lakes

photos by Brian Oar

{ EXPLORE }

ROBERT TRENT JONES TRAIL

CAPITOL HILL (Montgomery)

Play Judge, Senator, Legislator (54 holes)

Stay Montgomery Marriott Prattville at Capitol Hill

Eat Jim & Nick's BBQ **Other Cool Stuff** Cheaha State Park, Alabama's highest point

This **Marriott** was the first to be built directly on a Trail course (the Senator) and is cozy, quiet and secluded. The **Senator** is a Scottish-links-style replica with huge mounds and one too many pot bunkers. Annual host to the **LPGA Navistar Classic**. It hosts next year's Inaugural Robert Trent Jones-sponsored event. The **Legislator** is a thrill ride diving into and rippling through the native cypress swamps. Accolades aside, the **Judge** earns new accolades every day. The first tee is 200 feet above the fairway (Imagine hitting balls off the Golden Gate Bridge). With a dozen-plus signature holes, and 14 touching the water, it is the sternest test on the Trail, and marginally my favorite over Ross Bridge. The deck overlooking No. 1 is a mandatory post-round reflection point, with or without a beverage or cigar.

CAMBRIAN RIDGE (Greenville)

Play Sherling, Canyon, Loblolly, Short (4 nines, 36 holes)

Eat Waffle House. Think "Starbucks of the South." Every trip needs one Waffle House stop.

Other Cool Stuff The Grand Canyon Driving Range at Cambrian Ridge

Just 40 miles south of Montgomery, the secluded park-like **Cambrian Ridge** property is one you must see to believe. Many claim the **Sherling** to be the best nine on the entire Trail. It's a compelling argument: A stunning Augusta-like setting around barely rippling beautiful lakes. When the pin is at the summit of the four-tier, uphill green on No. 9 (shared with Canyon), golf writers have been known to five-putt it. I can neither confirm nor deny that. The **Canyon** cannot be overlooked with its spectacular elevated tee shots and insanely long (over water) 3-pars. **Loblolly** is the polar opposite to those two, a pleasant rolling ride. And the **Short** is the second best short nine on the Trail. Don't miss your opportunity to dine (and observe "poor putting clinics") on their 30-mile view veranda.

MAGNOLIA GROVE (Mobile)

Play Falls, Crossings, Short (54 holes) **Stay** Homewood Suites, Mobile

Eat The Brick Pit (If they have ribs) **Other Cool Stuff** Dauphin Island.

Magnolia Grove is the southernmost "official" member of the Trail and home to 54 holes of hardwood-lined golf. The more scenic **Crossings** hosts the LPGA Tour each spring. Recently renovated, it features unique oyster shell waste areas, a picturesque covered wooden bridge and one of the prettiest finishing holes in Alabama. The **Falls** (renovated in 2010) is the only par 71 on the Trail. The approach over the waterfall trench on No. 10 leads perfectly into the course's best tee shot on No. 11. The newly renovated **Short** course is second best 18-hole short set on the Trail. The **Battle House** was booked for *Tokarev*, a Nicolas Cage film shoot while we visited, but **Mobile Homewood Suites** filled in perfectly. Call ahead to make sure the **Brick Pit** has its signature ribs. If not, **The Shed** is just up the street.

LAKEWOOD (Point Clear)

Play Dogwood, Azalea (36 holes)

Stay Grand Hotel Marriott **Eat** Lambert's In Foley for dinner; Two Sisters Bakery for snacks

Our final stop on the Trail, this oasis on Mobile Bay has views from the famed **Grand Hotel** as picturesque as they come in Alabama. Across the street from the private **Lakewood Golf Club**, which alternates its courses daily to host Trail Card members, the Grand Hotel has beaches, jetties and piers to complement its bayside rooms, dining and activities galore. Lakewood Golf Club has two courses. This close to Foley, you have to eat at Lambert's, where a buffet is the appetizer.

speeds between 9 and 11; clean fairways and tee boxes without exception; and service inside and out living up to the very high Trail-wide expectations.

And these courses weren't just thrown together. Their locations were intentionally spread across the four distinct topographical regions of Alabama — mountains, wetlands, coastal and metropolitan centers — to provide the golfer with every imaginable element, environment and entertainment opportunity. Their designs were deliberately and diligently planned to the very last detail, and are clearly (even today) managed in the same vein: Southern hospitality at its very best.

Courses come in all shapes and sizes, from "short" 3-par designs routed in nines (three of them) or eighteen (four of them), to mammoth 8,200-yard beasts that seem much longer than the five miles they are mathematically.

Giants bear names like Fighting Joe, Mindbreaker, Heartbreaker, The Judge and Backbreaker — each living up to its daunting moniker.

The Trail comprises 172,398 yards of golf from the tips. That's 98 miles. My journey, from the Orange tees (averaging just under 6,800 yards per championship 18) covered 90,779 of those yards, or 52 miles of Robert Trent Jones golf. I negotiated 252 holes at 216 over par with a dozen birdies, two eagles (one of them my first-ever hole-in-one), more than 2,000 photos, and just as many smiles. From the first tee box in northwest Alabama, at Fighting Joe, to the last cup at Lakewood Golf Club, just off Mobile Bay in Point Clear, it was the greatest of adventures, the most epic of stateside golf trips, and the realization of a fantasy initiated by those billboards along a Minnesota highway a decade ago.

Though coined elsewhere, the phrase "if you build it, they will come" was made popular by the movie *Field of Dreams* in 1989. Shortly after the flick's debut, ground was broken on several of the Trail sites. Coincidence? Perhaps. But there's no doubt that each is a home run, on the big screen and in the biggest of Deep South scenes. For us, 10 golf-packed days on the Robert Trent Jones Trail is as heavenly as it gets in Alabama. Or pretty much anywhere. ☐

Capitol Hill,
Cambrian Ridge
& Magnolia Grove
photos by Michael Clemmer

